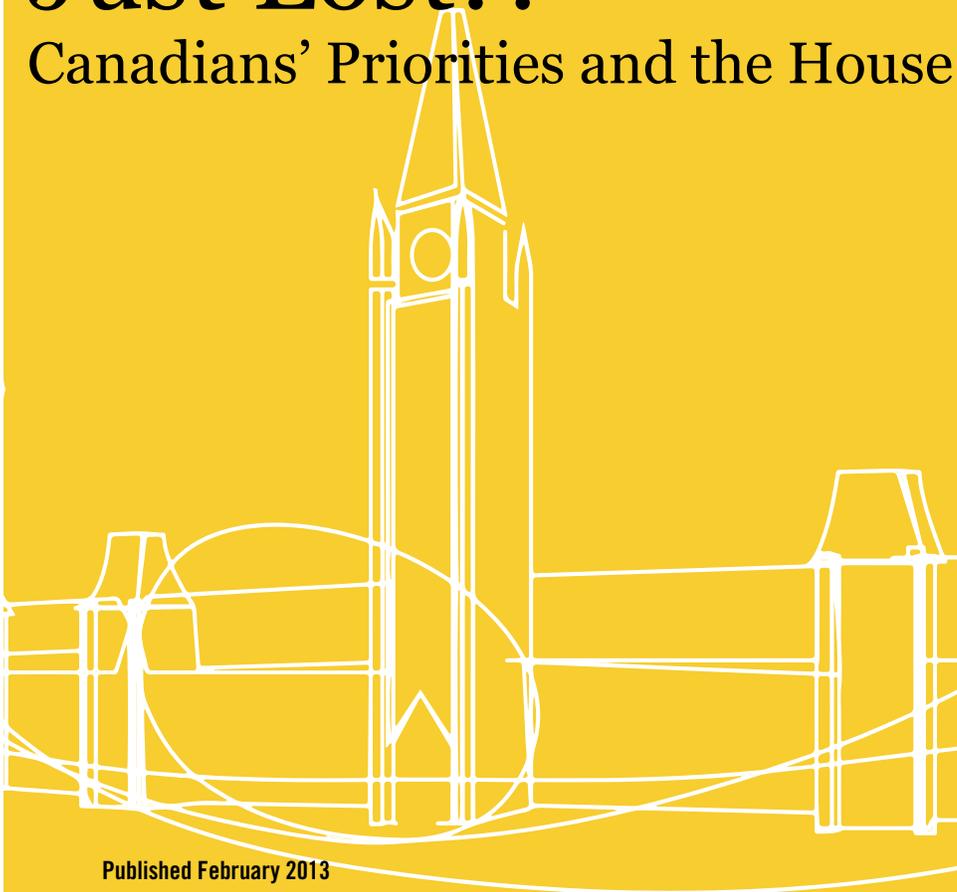


SAMARA DEMOCRACY REPORT #5

Lost in Translation or Just Lost?:

Canadians' Priorities and the House of Commons



Published February 2013

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Introduction

Parliament is more accessible to Canadians than at any time in history. In the past, only the most devoted had access to the House of Commons transcripts, which were delivered by mail. Democracy has gone digital: the TV cameras introduced in the House in 1977 now stream live online, and citizen-generated web tools like OpenParliament.ca help make parliamentary transcripts searchable and user-friendly. Members of Parliament, too, have more tools available to them in order to communicate with citizens—from Twitter to telephone town halls—than at any time in the past.

But this hasn't made Canadians feel any more connected to politicians or political institutions; instead they feel increasingly disconnected. In fact, as 2012 public opinion survey data from Samara shows, only 55% of citizens are satisfied with Canada's democracy—an all-time low.¹

That same research produced another unfortunate finding: Only 27% of Canadians think

Ottawa deals with the issues they feel are most important in a satisfactory way. These statistics echo comments from Canadians who are disengaged from politics: "Politicians are concerned for their own interests." "They don't really care what people want."²

Canada's system of democratic representation is faltering if a majority of Canadians do not

1. "Who's the Boss?", Samara Democracy Report, 2012

2. "The Real Outsiders", Samara Democracy Report, 2011

believe their interests are well represented by their elected representatives.

But is this a problem of perception or is it reality? Most Canadians don't see the full range of discussion in the House of Commons, so their opinions are likely formed by Question Period and the headlines of the day. This Samara Democracy Report, "Lost in Translation or Just Lost?," analyzes almost half a year's worth of parliamentary transcripts to discover what subjects are discussed in the House of Commons and compares them to the issues Canadians say they care about. This research gives Canadians a chance to go beyond the headlines, to eliminate the theatrics of Members speechifying, and to take a closer look at what is discussed, or not discussed, in the heart of Canada's democratic life: the House of Commons.

HOUSE OUT OF BALANCE

From 34 million people, Canadians elect 308 citizens who serve as representatives in the House of Commons, a public space for debate, accountability and decision-making. Canadians vote for their representatives and expect the House to be responsive to their concerns. At the same time, the House must deal with issues that are necessary to the running of the country but not always prioritized by Canadians. A balance between the two must be struck over the course of the parliamentary calendar.

Through this report, Samara—a charitable organization that improves political participation in Canada—sets out to do two things: First, to systematically assess if the Members of Parliament's discussion in the House of Commons

prioritizes the issues of concern to Canadians. Are Canadians correct that the balance is off—that public priorities are inadequately raised and debated in the House of Commons? Second, in response to the research findings, to stimulate a discussion about how the House of Commons could be more relevant to Canadians.

Despite Canadians' belief that the House of Commons doesn't prioritize Canadians' issues, Parliament is actually aligned with Canadians' interests, albeit weakly.

Over the 2012 parliamentary calendar year, Samara undertook an in-depth examination of how well the House of Commons debate aligned with Canadians' priorities. We compared public opinion survey data to official transcripts of almost half of Parliament's sitting days, and, with our co-author, Professor Kelly Blidook, created a score that quantifies the extent to which the House of Commons represents Canadians' priorities.

The results were surprising: despite Canadians' belief that the House of Commons doesn't prioritize Canadians' issues, Parliament³ is actually aligned with Canadians' interests, albeit weakly.

With some notable exceptions, several of Canadians' top issues were discussed the most in the House. However, during certain times of the year the discussion was better aligned with Canadians' priorities than during others, and perhaps more tellingly, certain scheduled times,

3. Though Canada's Parliament encompasses both the House of Commons and the Senate, this report uses the term Parliament to describe the House of Commons.

or “venues,” in the House of Commons’ day were better aligned than others. In fact, a pattern emerges: the venues in which MPs best reflect the priorities of Canadians are those where political parties exert the least influence over the MPs.

In the end, there seems to be a disconnect between what’s happening in the House of Commons and what Canadians believe is happening—something is “lost in translation.”

There are many possible reasons.

It’s possible that the oft-cited role of the decline in civility is playing a role in breaking down communications. Once emotions are involved, logic and understanding can be undermined and swept aside. Perhaps Canadians are turned off by watching the issues they value used as political punching bags. The media has traditionally been blamed for focusing on the partisan stories and not showing Canadians the full range of the work that’s happening on the House floor. In Samara’s series of exit interviews⁴ with former Members of Parliament, MPs agreed that this decline is real and that the party encourages, if not rewards, such behaviour.

It’s also possible that Canadians feel disconnected from politics because they recognize that

what they see in the House of Commons is only a slice of the decisions and debate in Ottawa. Many current and former Members of Parliament attest that, other than Question Period, the House is often almost empty. MPs often work elsewhere—in committee, caucus or their own offices (either in Ottawa or in the constituency)—and acknowledge that the “real work” and decision-making processes do not take place in the House.

With basic rules instituted centuries ago and a physical structure that emphasizes confrontation, not to mention whipped votes and debates shut down for Time Allocation, the House is not designed for dialogue and cross-partisan discussions. While Parliament is meant to be the country’s centre for democratic debate, Canada faces a fundamental problem that “decisions are made elsewhere and then imposed on this place.”⁵

What must change to enhance the representative work of MPs and their parties on Parliament Hill in order to make it relevant to Canadians—and set an agenda for Canada’s future? At the end of the report we explore the roles a few groups could play in making these changes, and we ask for solutions to this pressing question. ^

4. *Samara MP Exit Interviews*, 2011.

5. “The House of Commons is a sham,” Aaron Wherry, *Maclean’s*, 28 February 2011.

CHAPTER 1

Deconstructing the House of Commons

Working in the House of Commons is like no other job in the country. Most Canadians do not have parts of their job televised and their words recorded verbatim for public record; nor are they expected to sit in an enormous room through something akin to a seven-hour meeting while colleagues drift in and out, and where they may speak on talking points that they didn't write, and perhaps don't fully agree with.

Furthermore, without much training, MPs must grasp the complex set of rules and procedures—many with centuries-old origins—that structure the debate in the House, if they want to successfully participate. This is the reality for Members of Parliament working in the House of Commons. It's no wonder they describe themselves as “a trained seal.”⁶ In this chapter we offer a brief introduction to how the House of Commons functions: the ebb and flow of debate in a typical week and

how it affects the work of MPs. We consider one aspect of the MPs' role inside the House—discussing and debating issues of concern to them and to the country—and the way this research was designed to measure their success at doing so.

WHAT'S GOING ON IN THERE?

Question Period (QP) is consistently the most reported-on venue in the House of Commons and

6. “It's My Party': Parliamentary Dysfunction Reconsidered.” Samara MP Exit Interviews, 2011.

THE VENUES OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Different venues, or times, in the House of Commons have different functions.

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

About 60% of the House's time is spent in Government Business where the agenda is largely set by the Government. During this time, bills proposed by Ministers are debated, and the budget and supporting estimates that outline the government's expenditures are put forth for parliamentary approval. The major exceptions are the 22 days each year in which the Government must allow the Opposition to determine the topic of debate.

ORAL QUESTIONS

This is perhaps the most recognized venue in the House of Commons, known more commonly as "Question Period." During this daily 45-minute period, MPs ask questions of the Government. Questions and responses are limited to 35 seconds. Each party decides daily which of its MPs will participate in Question Period and provides the Speaker with a list of names and the suggested order of speaking.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

An hour each day is dedicated to debating bills and motions proposed by individual MPs who are not Parliamentary Secretaries or in Cabinet. Typically, one

proposal is debated during the one-hour venue. The order is established at the very beginning of a Parliamentary session by a random draw among MPs' names, meaning not all proposals will be debated.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

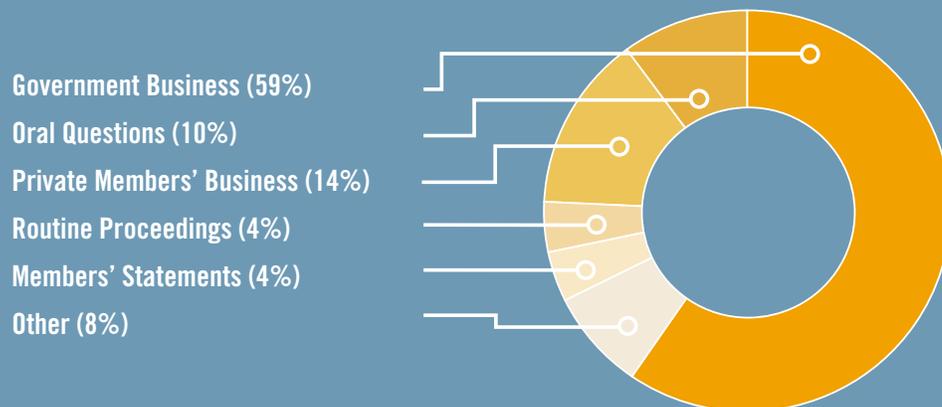
This venue consists of several categories of business that provide Members and Ministers with an opportunity to bring a variety of matters to the attention of the House. Petitions are presented during this time, bills are introduced, reports from Committees are shared, and government documents tabled or made available to the House of Commons, among other business. The amount of time allotted to Routine Proceedings varies from day to day depending on the agenda.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

These are awarded only 15 minutes each day, right before Question Period. This venue is an opportunity for MPs to speak for one minute to any matter of concern. The subject of these statements ranges widely, including events in MPs' ridings, recognition of a national awareness day or a domestic or international policy concern.

More detail about each venue can be found in the House of Commons Compendium online. Visit www.parl.gc.ca.

FIGURE 1: WHERE WORDS ARE SPOKEN IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS



Approximately 3.7 million words were included in this analysis. This covered a 54-day period of House debates. "Other" includes words from Adjournment Proceedings, Emergency Debates, Points of Order and any other discussion not captured within the venues above.

also the most criticized for the partisan rhetoric, lack of decorum and general bad behaviour. If QP is what many Canadians use to form their opinion about the work of the Commons, it's no surprise the public often has a dismal view of the work of MPs. And MPs agree. "I think that Question Period has become the greatest embarrassment and one of the reasons politicians are frowned upon."

"Outside of Question Period, it was dead in the House. There were twenty to thirty people there. They're on their computer, catching up on correspondence."

Despite its visibility, Question Period only takes up a fraction of the House's time—merely 45 minutes in an average seven-hour day. Much more time is spent debating the merits of legislation. As the graphic on the opposite page shows, time in the House is structured into several different "venues" to ensure that the views of both the government and the opposition can be voiced and debated.

Most Canadians don't witness the full range of this debate, and frankly neither do most MPs, who are present only for short chunks of time in the House. In addition to day-long House sessions, MPs attend committee meetings with fellow MPs, as well as meetings with constituents and associations, while staying on top of correspondence and fulfilling party duties. Generally, most only attend Question Period, votes and a few hours of weekly House Duty, as assigned to them by their party Whip.

As a result, the House is largely empty. As one former MP described it, "Outside of Ques-

tion Period, it was dead in the House. There were twenty to thirty people there. They're on their computer, catching up on correspondence." Despite this unfortunate reality, this report aims to analyze all issues of debate in the House of Commons—no matter how few ears they fell on.

BUILDING AN ALIGNMENT SCORE

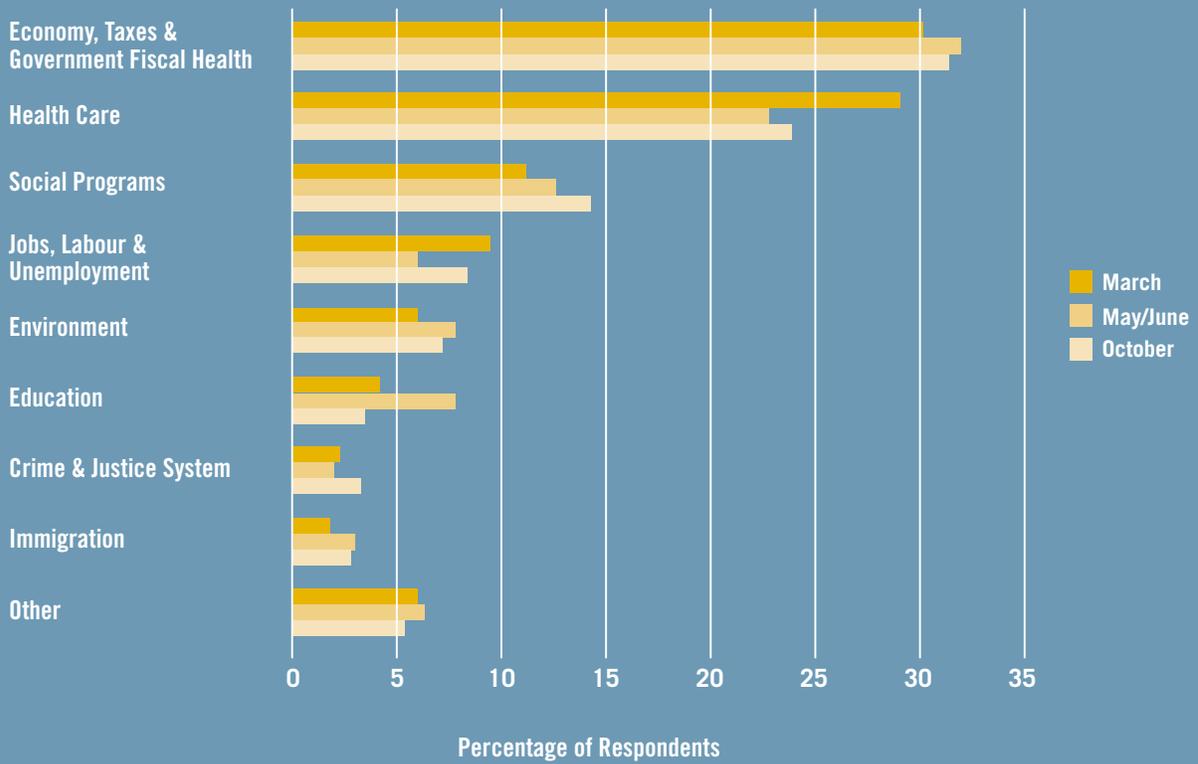
The policy issues dealt with in Parliament change throughout the year. In order to capture this, we selected three periods in 2012, each four weeks in duration, for a total of 54 working days, or just under half the total days that the House of Commons sits within a regular calendar year. (For a full description of the methodology, see page 22.)

When MPs speak in the House, they are recorded in Hansard, a permanent transcript. Samara, working with the Centre for the Study of Democratic Citizenship at McGill University, coded the text of Hansard for keywords—each related to one of 18 different policy areas, including Economy, Health Care and Jobs. Close to 900 keywords were used. For instance, words such as "doctor," "vaccine" or "hospital" would be included in the Health Care policy area. When the words are counted up as a percentage of the total words spoken, this allows us to measure whether, for example, the Environment comes up more often than Immigration.

This analysis treats all words equally—regardless of whether the speaker is a backbench MP, a member of Cabinet, or the Prime Minister. It is meant to capture general subject areas, not opinions on those subjects. While Canadians might disagree with the opinions expressed by MPs on an issue, our analysis places value solely on the fact that the issue has arisen in debate.

During each of the three periods, Samara conducted a public opinion survey among

**FIGURE 2:
ISSUES PRIORITIZED BY CANADIANS**



“Other” captures all issues where less than 1% of the respondents indicated it was most important to them — for example, Foreign Policy, Transportation and Aboriginal Relations.

Canadians, which included the question, “What political issue is most important to you personally?”

Canadians reported fairly consistent priorities across the three time periods Samara surveyed. As Figure 2 outlines, three issues were reported

as the “most important issue,” accounting for over 60% of all respondents’ opinions.

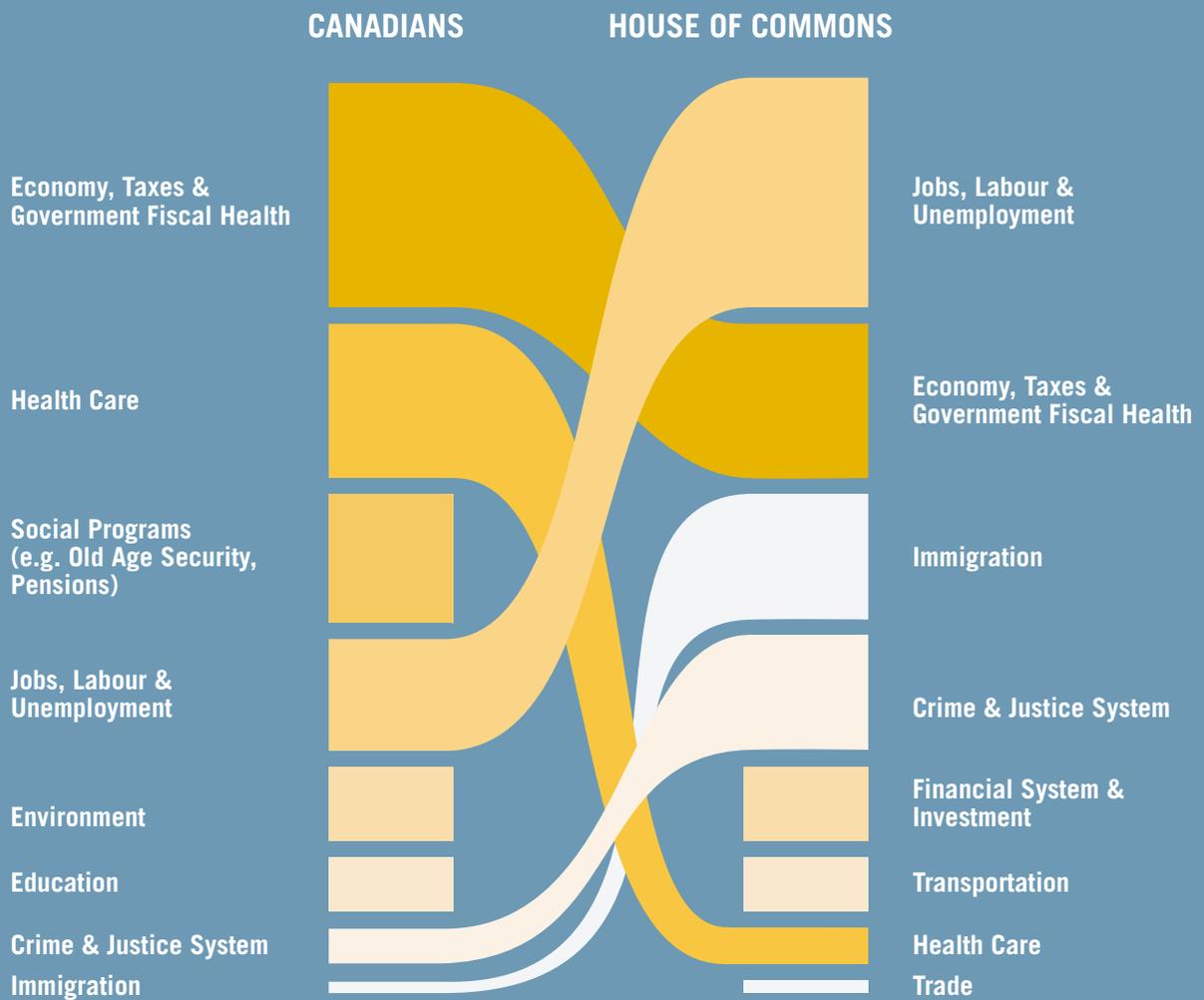
After collecting public opinion data and coding Hansard, we created two lists for each period. The first ranked policy issues in order of the number

of Canadians who named it “most important.” The second reflected the issues most often talked about in the House of Commons, by word count.

For example, from March 2012, two lists would look like Figure 3 below (this example only displays the top eight issues).

As Figure 3 shows, there is clearly some overlap. Both columns contain, for instance, Economy, Taxes & Government Fiscal Health and Immigration, though they are ranked differently. There are also some issues that appear only on one side: Environment shows up in the top

**FIGURE 3:
ISSUES RANKED BY IMPORTANCE
ACCORDING TO CANADIANS AND THE HOUSE OF COMMONS**



eight Canadian priorities, but not in the House of Commons' list, while Transportation does the opposite. (Keep in mind that the upcoming analysis compares 18 policy issues.)

To quantify how much difference or similarity there is between lists, we created an alignment score in association with Professor Kelly Blidook at Memorial University. It places the degree of alignment between the two lists on a continuum of -100 to $+100$.

A score of -100 would result if the two lists were perfect opposites of one another, whereas a $+100$ score would result if the House perfectly reflected the priorities of Canadians.

WHY MEASURE ALIGNMENT?

Many Canadians have significant doubts about the political system's ability to respond to their interests and priorities. In Samara's 2012 public opinion research, Canadians awarded MPs a performance score of only 44% for "representing the views of their constituents." This suggests that most Canadians would anticipate little alignment between the issues that concern them and what's discussed on the floor of the Commons, or in other words, an alignment score in the negative range.

Canadians want MPs in the House of Commons to respond to them and represent their interests, but at the same time, perfect alignment isn't desirable. Sometimes the Members in the House of Commons must deal with issues that are necessary to the running of the country, or respond to a natural disaster or international conflict, even though such issues are perhaps not top priorities for all Canadians. For example, most experts would likely agree that addressing trade issues in Canada are crucial to Canada's economic health. Nevertheless, as an issue, Trade doesn't rank high

for Canadians. Most Canadians would also likely agree that leaders should not doggedly subscribe to public opinion or, worse still, veer off course each time a vocal minority raises a concern.

Yet, government should not ignore issues that are consistently high on the public's priority list.

If there were truly no link between public priorities and parliamentary priorities, then Canadians could logically conclude that their MPs are failing to represent them.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

This type of analysis has both strengths and limitations. By looking at all the words spoken by MPs, this analysis systematically assesses what is talked about in the House of Commons beyond the headlines. It strips away the sometimes theatrical speeches, removes the emotional impact of their delivery and focuses on the subjects MPs are actually discussing. It also makes it easy to compare words spoken by MPs from different parties as well as words spoken throughout the day in different venues in the House of Commons.

Of course, this study does not capture the full scope of responsiveness. It doesn't account for the greater influence some words may have—whether on policy outcomes or budget allocations. To measure such impact, however, is both challenging and, to a great extent, subjective. Nor does it count words that are not part of the public record—the exchanges MPs have at their desks, offices, or in the two lobbies behind the backbenches of the House. While inevitably much of an MP's work happens outside the House of Commons, the goal of this research is to shine a light on what the public platform for our elected leaders tells us about Canada's representative democracy, and whether the House of Commons itself is the best forum for public decision making. ^

CHAPTER 2

Findings

Canadians are largely consistent in rating their “most important issue,” which provides Members of Parliament with a steady target in terms of priorities. But how consistently do MPs overall and across all parties speak to these issues?

When the Hansard results are compared to Canadians’ priorities, three observations stand out. First, there is greater alignment between the issues Canadians care about and the issues discussed in the House than Canadians’ perceptions may suggest. In fact, the alignment measure is positive, and consistently so. Second, the venues where parties exert less control are more closely aligned with Canadians’ priorities. Finally, there are differences among the parties, where the combined expressions of MPs within a given party are more representative of Canadian interests than those of other parties.

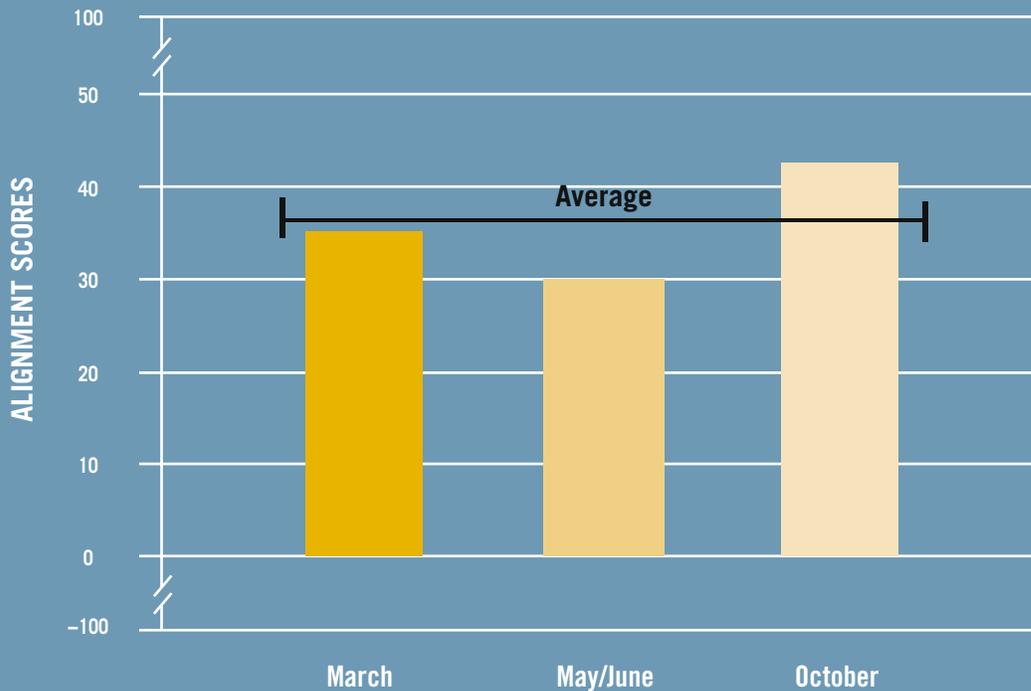
PARLIAMENT BY THE MONTH

Through all of 2012, the House of Commons was

aligned, although weakly, with Canadians’ priorities. These results suggest MPs are doing a better job of representing Canadians’ views than Canadians might expect. Notably, as Figure 4 shows, there is some variation across the three periods in our analysis—evidence that alignment can and does shift over time in response to the changes in what subjects are debated in the House.

For instance, Health Care, which is consistently Canadians’ second-ranked priority, did not make it into the top eight issues discussed in the Commons in May/June. This likely contributed to the lower alignment score during the period. Other priority areas did not appear among the top issues debated in the House in two out of three periods: Social Programs, Environment and Education. Notably

**FIGURE 4:
ALIGNMENT SCORES FOR PARLIAMENT**



many of these policy areas are ones in which the federal government shares jurisdiction, and often spending commitments, with other levels of government. Nonetheless, MPs are not precluded from raising such issues.

There was overlap among the three most-discussed topics in the House and Canadians' top eight priorities. First, Jobs, Labour & Unemployment, which was also the most frequently debated topic during the time periods covered. Second, Economy, Taxes & Government Fiscal Health, which was often the second most debated, and finally, Crime & Justice. This last subject area, however, was consistently ranked lower than third place among Canadians' list of policy priorities.

VENUES IN THE HOUSE

There is also a great variation across time when we break down the debate by different venues in the House (Figure 5).

Looking at the average alignment score for each venue, two align more closely to Canadians' priorities: MP Statements and Routine Proceedings. In some instances, such as presenting petitions to Parliament during Routine Proceedings, MPs are representing Canadians' concerns directly. Both venues share a common characteristic: MPs have greater autonomy over what they say, with less party scripting and influence in those venues. The policy stakes, after all, are relatively lower as these venues do not see the

**FIGURE 5:
ALIGNMENT SCORES IN DIFFERENT HOUSE VENUES**



passage of legislation. However, caution is called for; some signs—further discussed in the next section—suggest the traditional autonomy is changing and that MPs now have less freedom to choose the issues they will raise.

Government Business, on the other hand, closely matches the overall alignment measure for the House of Commons—which is not wholly surprising since this venue comprises the bulk of the House’s agenda.

Oral Questions (QP) is not as well aligned with Canadians’ priorities as MP Statements or Routine Proceedings, but it is better aligned than Government Business. Considering the responsive potential in QP—that there is no subject set in advance and a wide variety of subjects is discussed—this score was lower than expected.

In fact, the venue’s responsive potential seems to be lost on those that tightly script QP: Leaders’ offices hand-pick MPs to ask a question,

typically on a topic selected by the leader's office. The MPs are normally required to rehearse their questions in advance, just as Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries normally rehearse their anticipated responses. With all spontaneity eliminated, MPs with a burning question for QP can only hope that the party believes it is worth asking as well.

“The staff got their direction from the Prime Minister’s Office, so I assume from the PM himself, to become much more partisan in Member Statements.... It really got over the top, way over the top.”

Private Members’ Business’s average score lands in-between that of the other venues. As a means for MPs to pursue their preferred issues, it clearly has potential for alignment; the alignment score for March was particularly high.

However, the venue has its own unique constraints. A list of approximately 15 bills and motions rotate through at any one time, with the daily one-hour slot dedicated to debating one piece of Private Members’ Business. Combined with the necessary deliberation on proposed bills, it can take an extremely long time for items to proceed. This fact likely explains why there was such wide variability in alignment across the three periods.

PARTY INFLUENCE GROWS

Although no past scores are available, it is our hope

that this research serves as a benchmark to see whether alignment improves or declines over time and in different venues.

For the moment, these findings suggest two observations:

First, while these results may foster an element of optimism, the overall alignment scores could be much higher, particularly considering that some venues (such as Members’ Statements and Routine Proceedings) demonstrate that greater alignment is possible.

Second, the venues with greater party influence are pulling the alignment scores down. This observation relates to comments made by MPs and political observers that partisan attacks are serving as substitutes for policy discussion or debate, or curtailing the preferences of MPs in both the issues they raise and how they raise them. For example, Éric Grenier, author of the political blog *threehundredeight.com*, analyzed a sample of almost 1,000 speeches made during Members’ Statements between 1994 and 2012 on the first few days after the House had re-convened from summer break.⁷ He observes that the use of partisan statements—statements with a primary purpose to attack another party or praise the speaker’s own party—grew from 14% during the 1994–2006 years to 24% after 2006.

MPs themselves acknowledge this trend. According to a former MP, the growing pressure on MPs to deliver a party message is palpable: “The staff got their direction from the Prime Minister’s Office, so I assume from the PM himself, to become much more partisan in member statements.... It really got over the top, way over the top.”

7. “How routine MP speeches are becoming more and more partisan,” Éric Grenier, *The Globe and Mail*. 24 September 2012.

Some of these same inclinations appear to be underway in Private Members' Business. Samara's 2011 report "It's My Party" observed that several former MPs "complained that political parties were increasingly limiting the abilities of MPs to introduce their own Private Member's Bill, instead using them to test a potential piece of legislation. One MP, appointed as critic by her party, claimed that a great deal of the legislation she managed was, in fact, 'government feelers' disguised as Private Members' Bills."⁸

Furthermore, during the 54 days included in the study, debate on bills was cut short without all-party support on ten occasions through the use of the procedural motion known as Time Allocation, and twice with a Closure motion. When agreed to by a majority of MPs, these

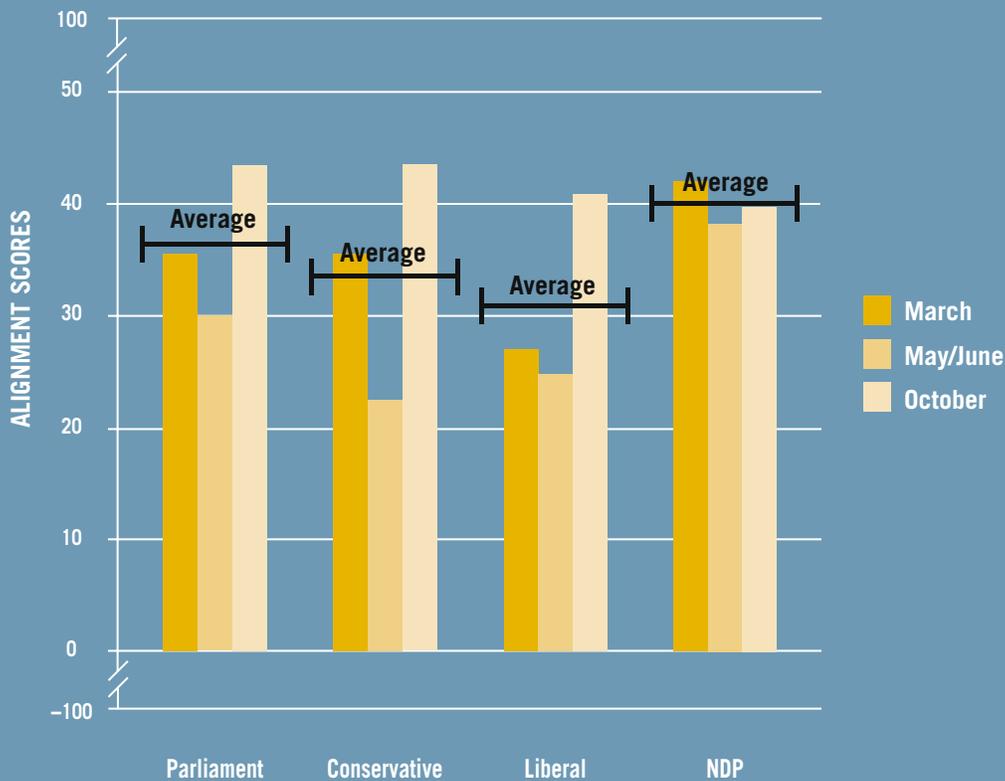
procedures limit the duration of debate, even if some MPs still wish to speak to the proposed legislation. The increased use of this mechanism without the support of both sides of the House may unfortunately trade quality of representation for efficiency. Moreover, the majority government of the 41st Parliament is well on its way to surpassing the rate at which Time Allocation is imposed compared to previous majority governments dating back to 1971, when it was first used.⁹

If these observations are correct and the trends continue towards increasingly scripted exchanges and encroaching pressure on MPs from the centre of power in their party during Members' Statements and Private Members' Business, we could expect alignment scores to decline. ^

8. "It's My Party," Samara MP Exit Interviews, 2011.

9. Use of Time Allocation between the 28th and 36th Parliaments (1971–2000) can be found in: "Silencing Parliamentary Democracy or Effective Time Management? Time Allocation in the House of Commons." Yves Yvon J. Pelletier, *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Winter 2000–2001. Samara compiled use of Time Allocation data for the 41st Parliament.

**FIGURE 6:
ALIGNMENT SCORES COMPARED ACROSS PARTIES**



How do the alignment scores among the official political parties in the House compare to the overall score for the House of Commons?

The Conservative Party closely matches the pattern of the House of Commons—not surprising since, as the party in Government, they control a large proportion of the House’s agenda. The Liberal Party underperformed compared to the overall Commons. In contrast to both Conservative and Liberal parties, the New Democratic Party over-performed, helping to boost the overall alignment of Parliament.

CHAPTER 3

Redesigning the House of Commons

If, as this evidence suggests, the House of Commons is more aligned with Canadians' priorities than Canadians might expect, why do many Canadians still dismiss Parliament as off-topic and irrelevant?

First, are MPs turning off Canadians, not by what they say but by how they say it? The bad behaviour by MPs in the House, whether it stems from individual decisions or, as many MPs say, the order of the various parties, is likely seen as a travesty of adult debate.

Second, though the House of Commons should be the public and central place for representation of Canadians by their elected representatives, there is legitimate concern that the debate is more symbolic and that much of the "real" debate (and the actual decision making) is done out of the camera's eye, in caucus or MPs' offices. That is, what if the work of the House of

Commons is not merely lost in translation, but simply lost?

What's to be done? The first step, we argue, is to empower the MP to represent their constituents in the publicly accountable space of the House of Commons. But beyond that, we contemplate what questions need to be explored to make Parliament function better and to meet the expectations of 21st-century decision-makers.

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU SAY; IT'S HOW YOU SAY IT

Communication is breaking down at a moment in time where there is tremendous potential to connect Parliament to Canadians and Canadians

to Parliament. The point about “lack of decorum,” though often repeated, is still important. The presentation of ideas matters, and the prominent partisan displays in the House distract from debate. As one former MP confirmed, “The unfortunate thing is that Question Period is used as the barometer of what goes on in Ottawa. And, unfortunately, it is really a zoo. It’s theatre.” Many Canadians may wonder why MPs as a group can’t stop themselves; former MPs note that it can be hard to sustain a united front when the party maintains a system of incentives that rewards the bad behaviour.

A similar note was struck by Canadian journalist, Chantal Hébert, in a fall 2012 column. After 35 years covering the Hill, she observed: “The first time I took a seat in the House gallery as a twenty-something reporter, I was wide-eyed. Today, I mostly wish I could look away.”¹⁰ When subjects close to a Canadian’s heart are presented with the vitriol displayed in the House, it is easier to tune out.

“They’re there because they have to be. There are very few Members who are there because they want to be.”

As well, it’s likely that on the occasions when Canadians do tune in, the anachronistic style of the House, with its formal rules that shape both speaking and voting, seems very much out of touch with the reality of Canadians’ lives.

But even if all House debate became more civil and respectful overnight, and appeared more in tune with a modern workplace, Canadians might still find Parliament no more relevant to their lives.

SHELL GAME?

A far more serious threat to Parliament than declining decorum is simply that the over 8 million words accumulated over a year of debate may not really matter because Parliament itself doesn’t really matter.

Though MPs’ duties revolve around the House, most MPs spend their time beyond its doors, where the cameras are absent and they are able to work in a less confrontational manner: in committee, in caucus, in pre-committee meetings, in the Members’ lobbies, and in their offices. Former MPs often described the House as a ghost-town, with only a few Members present, as prescribed by their respective Whips. As one MP observed, “They’re there because they have to be. There are very few Members who are there because they want to be.”

Put more bluntly by one former Government House Leader: “the House of Commons [has] ... got a monopoly on ‘waste of time.’” Yet this isn’t simply because the House debate is often confrontational, but rather because it is without real weight. On this point, a former party leader observed in a public speech, “it’s a kind of empty, pointless debating chamber because it’s all stitched up in advance by party leaders.”¹¹ The actual debate has little meaning.

It’s very possible that Canadians intuitively sense that the House is a shell game. The MPs,

10. “Hébert: House of Commons no longer a source of wonderment for journalist.” Chantal Hébert, *Toronto Star*, 19 October 2012.

11. “I think parliament is going to die’: Ignatieff predicts end of Western democracies.” Randy Boswell, *National Post*, 5 November 2012.

by their absence, show Canadians how unimportant the Commons is. Should we be surprised, then, when Canadians accord Parliament so little respect? If the majority of time the House spends in session is not important enough for decision-makers to participate, why invest so much time and millions of taxpayers' dollars in it each year?¹² Perhaps it's time to rethink how that time is used, and more fundamentally, how Canadians take decisions on the policy issues that matter to the future of their country.

REPRESENTING THE CITIZEN

The MP is meant to represent the citizen, and to do so publicly. Is there a way to draw the MPs back into the House, so that their work can be recorded and evaluated? We saw that the venues in which party reins were loosened allowed MPs to speak to Canadians' priorities.

How can the House of Commons be better designed such that individual MPs are free to raise and debate issues? This is particularly important given that the venues with less party influence were found to be more closely aligned with Canadians' concerns, yet have relatively limited policy impact, and more worryingly, look to be increasingly compromised by greater party control and partisanship. How then can the voice of the MP be enhanced?

At least three options exist. First, the parties, recognizing the low esteem in which Canadians hold Parliament, could benevolently offer up some of their power to the MPs. Second, the MPs could wrest control from the party and stand up to the leaders, or at a minimum, refuse to use partisan talking points and instead draft their own remarks. Third, the rules that oversee House

debate, the Standing Orders, could be changed to enforce a more open debate.

Many former MPs have told us that the first option, that parties will voluntarily give MPs free rein, or at least more independence, is unlikely to occur.

At least one former MP argues that the second option is the right one: change must come from within, among MPs, even in the face of punishment. Most immediately, it involves MPs standing up to party leaders together, though this has its challenges, too: "I said to my colleagues, the only way we will ever get [partisan Members' Statements] to stop is if enough of you refuse. It's your Member Statement..." Yet, such an approach can be hard to maintain when "... [the party leadership] would always find people who wanted to be up on television."

Moreover, there can be a real political cost for MPs who take a stand: from being demoted or removed from committee assignments, to receiving few, if any, opportunities to speak in the House, to being ousted from caucus or worse. Parties—and particularly the leaders' offices—hold the ultimate trump card to guarantee discipline among their ranks: a leader must sign an MP's candidacy papers should he or she wish to run for re-election.

Third, shifts in procedures over the past few decades, which have eroded MPs' ability to consider and speak up on issues, could be addressed and changed to produce a better alignment with Canadians' priorities. Even ten years ago, the Library of Parliament noted in a report that MPs were seldom given enough time or incentive to form their own opinions or represent constituents in the course of the House's structured debate.

12. "Our House: Report to Canadians 2011." Parliament of Canada, 2011. www.parl.gc.ca.

This was, the report says, driven by a reduction in the amount of House time available for consideration of Private Members' legislation, use of Time Allocation on bill debates, and time limits in Question Period, "all examples of procedural trends limiting the capacity of the individual Member to make independent representative inputs, even where party discipline does not preclude this in the first place."¹³ There are many ways that Standing Orders could be changed to allow MPs to carve out a space and allow for a more democratic exchange—though this approach requires both MPs and party leaders to work together.

NEXT STEPS

"Lost in Translation or Just Lost?" shows that while the MPs in the House of Commons may actually provide a clearer reflection of Canadian interests than many perceive, something far more fundamental is amiss. The body of evidence Samara has been gathering from exit interviews with former MPs, focus groups with a diverse group of Canadians and national public opinion research, suggests that the Commons is not currently set up to allow Canadians to see the full range of what actually happens in their democracy—either within the House walls, or beyond them. This may be leading to some of the disillusionment people report.

This troubling reality calls for a bigger check-up on our Parliament. As Canada approaches its 150th birthday, it is a good time for MPs, parties and Canadians to step back and evaluate how

the institution should change to meet the expectations Canadians have of it. Of course institutional change like this won't happen overnight, but it won't happen at all if citizens don't imagine a better way. Below are but a few questions we should collectively consider:

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- How could Parliament be better at communicating its purpose and experience to Canadians?
 - How could the House of Commons be designed to draw attention to the thoughts and words of its MPs?
 - How can the House maintain venues where MPs have freedom to represent constituents in a way that is respected by the parties?
 - How can we ensure debates in the House are meaningful, well-considered and have influence?
 - How can we improve the tone of debate, decrease the party rhetoric and the vitriolic attacks so that more Canadians want to tune in and perhaps even serve in public office?
 - How can Canada's venue for public debate and decision-making better reflect MPs and Canadians' expectations?
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The goal, for Canada, should be to build a House of Commons with the transparency, responsiveness and authority to ably serve Canadians through the 21st century. ^

13. "The Roles of the Member of Parliament in Canada: Are They Changing?" Jack Stilborn, Library of Parliament, Political and Social Affairs Division, 2002.

WHAT CAN I DO?

Samara is committed to making discussions about parliamentary renewal more accessible for Canadians. Our aim is to collect and curate suggestions, and work to bring forward solutions. To get started, there are a number of things you can do:

- Share this report with family, friends and colleagues and ask them for their thoughts.
- Start a dinner conversation around one or more of the questions in Chapter 3.
- Write to your MP about this issue and/or invite them to speak on the issue in your community.
- If you are a teacher or student, lead a classroom discussion on the topic of Parliament.
- If you are part of a book club or community group, dedicate a meeting to discussing Canada's Parliament and its state of affairs.

Share your feedback and experiences through our “Redesigning Parliament” project, where we're profiling ideas from Canadians on the change they'd like to see in their representative government. To join this conversation, please visit www.samaracanada.com.

Methodology

HANSARD

This study collected data from public opinion surveys and the text of Hansard during three periods in 2012. Date selection was driven by the cycle of the Parliamentary calendar and determined in advance of the data collection.

- “March” = March 5 to April 5
- “May/June” = May 14 to June 15
- “October” = September 20 to October 20

For the House of Commons, the selection reflects 54 days out of a total of 135 sitting days in 2012, or 40% of the time the House was in session. In terms of raw data, this was equivalent

to approximately 3.7 million words spoken.

Stuart Soroka of McGill University oversaw the collection and coding of Hansard. Using automated content analysis — a computer-aided research method — text from Hansard was analyzed for the presence of key words from a pre-determined list. The list, or “topic dictionary,” used in Samara’s study included 870 key words across 18 different policy headings. The topic dictionary was adapted by Stuart Soroka for the Canadian context from the Policy Agendas Project (www.policyagendas.org).

Full list of eighteen policy headings

- Aboriginal Relations
- Economy & Government Fiscal
- Health
- Crime
- Education
- Labour
- Energy
- Environment
- Financial System & Investment
- Food Industry
- Foreign Policy & Defence
- Forestry & Mining
- Health Care
- Immigration
- Political Participation
- Religion
- Social Programs
- Trade
- Transportation

SAMARA'S PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

In order to capture Canadians' issue priorities, Samara conducted three public opinion surveys that overlapped with the same time periods for which Hansard was collected (March, May/June and October). The research was conducted in French and English using an online panel of Canadians.

Each survey contained a consistently worded question: "What political issue is most important to you personally?" Respondents could select from a menu of options, or name their own issue. Responses in this "Other" category were sometimes folded into existing categories or grouped to form a new one.

The first survey went into the field between March 19 and April 2, 2012. During this round, the question was part of the Samara Citizen Survey—a larger survey with 2287 respondents.

The second survey went into the field between June 4 and June 9, 2012, and included 500 respondents.

The third survey went into the field between October 9 and October 14, 2012, and included 539 respondents.

Survey responses were weighted to ensure they reflected the actual population distribution in Canada. To request additional information about the surveys and their methodology, please [contact Samara](#).

ALIGNMENT SCORE

In order to construct a consistent set of topics for

both the opinion data and the Hansard data, some survey responses were grouped into a broader category. For example, the categories of the Economy; Government Debt/Deficit; and Taxes were combined from the survey to construct the single category Economy, Taxes, and Government Fiscal Health, which better fits the single policy issue topic. Social Programs as a single category captures survey responses including Pensions, Elderly Care and Child Care. The end result was to have opinion categories that fit the policy categories as closely as possible, and then determine how closely those common categories align.

Kelly Blidook recommended the use of Spearman's rho to construct the alignment score comparing the issues discussed most in the House with the order of Canadians' priority issues. Spearman's rho is a measure that can effectively illustrate how closely two different rankings of issues are correlated. This worked well since the content of the ranked lists were similar (i.e. the policy topics), but based on different units of measure (public opinion support for one, words spoken in the House on the other). Notably, whether many or few units separate the scores between first and second spots, for example, do not matter in this type of calculation. Spearman's rho correlation scores (i.e. "alignment scores" in this report) are generated a scale of -1 to $+1$. We then converted these scores to a scale of -100 to $+100$ for the report. ^

Samara Democracy Reports

Samara's Democracy Reports are a series designed to shine a light on Canada's democratic system and increase Canadians' understanding of politics. These reports investigate commonly held assumptions, provoke questions and elevate the discussion on the health of political and democratic participation in Canada.

Previous Democracy Reports are available at www.samaracanada.com:

- "The Real Outsiders" examined the attitudes of less-engaged Canadians towards politics and democracy.
- "The Neighbourhoods of #cdnpoli" illustrated the #cdnpoli discussion on Twitter.
- "Occupiers and Legislators" analyzed how the media covers politics.
- "Who's the Boss?" offered a performance review for Members of Parliament.

These reports will culminate in the Samara Index, which focuses on the relationship between citizens and the political process that governs Canadians.

ABOUT SAMARA

Samara is a charitable organization dedicated to improving political participation in Canada. Through research and educational programs, Samara reconnects citizens to politics.

To advance our goals, Samara initiates research, writes reports, runs public events, conducts media interviews, speaks at conferences and produces curriculum materials for schools and universities.

The findings from our MP Exit Interview project and Democracy Reports project received extensive national and local media coverage, and are referenced by columnists and decision makers. The findings were used to improve orientation for newly-elected MPs in 2011, are used by several academics in their own research and have been adapted into curriculum materials for use in high schools and universities across Canada.

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Publisher: Samara

Data collection: Public opinion surveys supervised by Dr. André Turcotte of Feedback Research; Hansard coding supervised by Dr. Stuart Soroka, McGill University

Data analysis: Dr. Kelly Blidook, Memorial University

Writers: Kendall Anderson, Kelly Blidook, Jane Hilderman and Alison Loat

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Volunteer research assistance: Laura Legault, Clement Nocos and Steven Lee

Designer: Emma Jenkin

Editor: Damian Tarnopolsky

Funders: Samara is an independent charitable organization funded by lead contributions from the MacMillan Family Foundation, The Ontario Trillium Foundation, The Aurea Foundation and Bennett Jones, as well as many other individuals and foundations whose names can be found at www.samaracanada.com/about-us/funders-and-partners. We would like to thank all the individuals and groups who have contributed to the success of Samara's research and education efforts. If you are interested in supporting Samara's work, please visit www.samaracanada.com or contact us at 416-960-7926. ^